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GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE REVIEW

CIA/RR-MR-49

March 1956

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE REVIEW

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THE SOVIET NEW LANDS PROGRAM

The New Lands Program, formally launched in March 1954, is the most recent Soviet attempt to increase grain production. Since the Communist rise to power, the struggle for increased production has precipitated many changes in economic policy. The fall of former Premier Malenkov was associated with the failure of the agricultural program during his tenure. Party Boss Khrushchev's position of strength has been attributed in some degree to the successful new-lands harvests in 1954.

The ambitious New Lands Program had as its immediate goal the sowing of 30 million hectares (74 million acres) to grain by the spring of 1956. The bulk of the virgin and idle lands being brought under cultivation lie in the semiarid-steppe and wooded-steppe regions of the southern Urals, Western Siberia, and northern Kazakhstan. These new lands are being sown primarily to spring wheat, with smaller acreages of millet and corn.

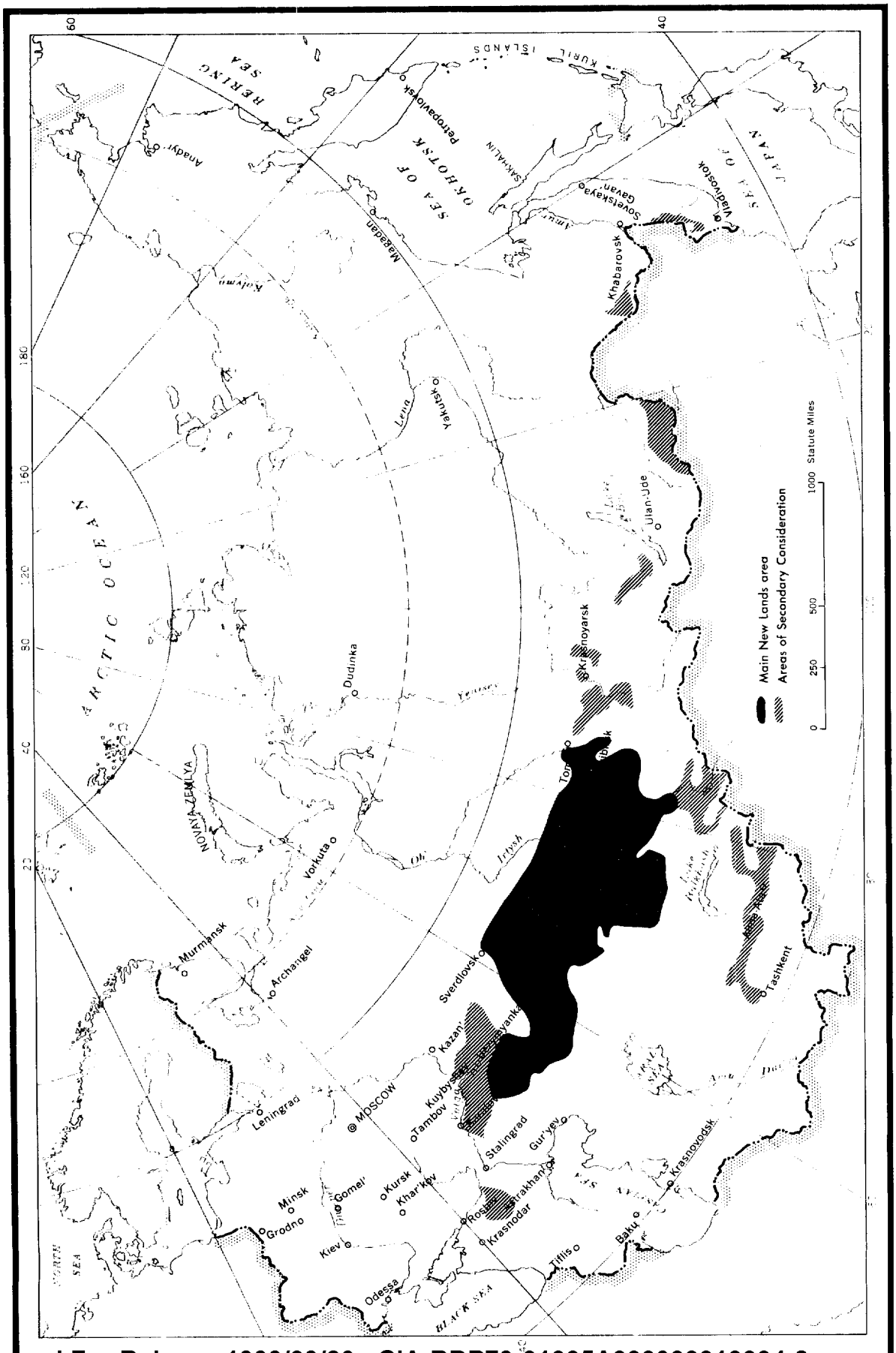
Soviet Five-Year Plans in the past have included many schemes for land reclamation and development and for acclimatization of crops to new conditions. In the early 1930's acreage increases were emphasized, whereas in the later 1930's the emphasis was on improved yields. In the two postwar Five-Year Plans (1946-50, 1951-55), an increase in yields was the announced goal. Production figures published during those years seemed to indicate varying degrees of success. Since the

figures, however, were based on preharvest estimates rather than barn yields, actual progress could not be accurately gauged.

In a report to the 19th Communist Party Congress in the fall of 1952, Malenkov went so far as to state that "The grain problem ... is successfully solved, definitely and irrevocably." After the death of Stalin in March of 1953, obvious weaknesses in Soviet agriculture began to emerge, including the negative effects of the pseudoscientific Lysenko influence; and a new solution to the grain situation was sought in the form of the New Lands Program. The Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party decreed that grain was to be sown on 13 million additional hectares (32 million acres) of virgin and idle lands by 1955 -- 2.3 million hectares (5.6 million acres) in 1954 and the remainder in 1955.

The goal set by the plan was exceeded in the spring of 1954, when 3.6 million hectares (8.9 million acres) were planted. In August 1954 the target was increased to 15 million hectares (37 million acres) in 1955 and 30 million hectares (74 million acres) in 1956. Spring plantings amounted to 20 million hectares in 1955, again exceeding the goal. Latest reports on 1955 fall plowing indicate that the 1956 goal will probably be reached or exceeded.

The five reasons for increased grain production announced by Khrushchev are (1) to meet the bread-grain requirements of an ever-increasing population, (2) to provide an adequate feed base for livestock, (3) to build up reserves for "all kinds of eventualities,"



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(4) to facilitate the specialized production of non-grain crops in other regions, and (5) to increase the amount of grain available for export. The political implications of the program are subject to a variety of interpretations. Even the strategic aspects of a far-inland grain-producing region might be worth considering.

In 1955 the organizational emphasis was on the creation of new sovkhozes, which are more directly controlled by the state than are kolkhozes. The direct returns of the sovkhoz as compared with the kolkhoz would reflect more quickly any success of the program.

A geographic analysis of the New Lands Area indicates that the problems created by the physical environment merit most serious consideration. Precipitation, length of growing season, and soil types set almost definitive limits to the areal expansion of grain production. Where average available moisture barely meets crop needs, crop failures can almost assuredly be expected in years of below-normal moisture supply. Similarly, where crops are sown on soils of marginal salinity, poor yields and soil-management problems are sure to result.

The climate of the New Lands is characterized by low annual precipitation and broad annual and diurnal ranges in temperature. Winters are long and cold; summers are hot and windy; and the transitional spring and fall seasons are short. The length of the frost-free season sets definite limits to agricultural expansion to the north, where later spring frosts and earlier fall frosts are

increasing hazards. Summer temperatures are usually high enough for spring wheat and millet but not for corn. To the south, moisture availability is the critical factor in agricultural expansion. The southern boundary of new-lands activity consequently follows roughly the 75-millimeter isohyet for the growing season, May through July. That drought is a major hazard was clearly evidenced by the greatly reduced yields in 1955. Therefore the overriding critical factor in the New Lands is the irregularity and undependability of the precipitation within any one year and from year to year. In the past, droughts have occurred on an average of 2 out of 5 years, and they will probably recur with the same frequency in the future.

Terrain presents no obstacle to agricultural expansion except in a few small, isolated localities. The New Lands Region consists of an unbroken expanse of plain in the north and a series of rolling hills and dissected plateaus in the south. About 65 percent of the land is level enough for cultivation, 20 percent is rolling land that could be used for meadow and pasture, and only 15 percent is in slopes too steep for agricultural use.

The most productive soils of the New Lands are the chernozems, which make up about 30 percent of the total. The soils of the area may be divided into three major belts. The northern consists of a complex mosaic of soils that vary considerably in their suitability for small-grain production. In the broad expanse of chernozems forming the middle belt the soils are of moderate to high productivity.

The southern belt has dark chestnut soils, which are also productive but somewhat less so than the chernozems. The numerous occurrences of saline and alkali soils drastically reduce the seemingly great reserves of virgin and idle land available for agriculture. Limited moisture influences both structure and productivity of all the major soil types.

Although the New Lands have actually been settled for many years and contain a number of large cities, extensive areas are still sparsely populated. The New Lands Program initiates a new era of settlement and development that will increase population, stimulate the growth of existing villages and towns, introduce new sovkhoz settlements, and change the ethnic composition of the area. Newly established sovkhozes, manned by migrants from all parts of European USSR, will carry the main burden of new cultivation. The provision of adequate housing and other facilities for them has been an important problem in the settlement program. In the standard pattern for developing new sovkhoz settlements, strong state control will apparently be an important element.

An efficient transportation system is needed for both the development and maintenance of the New Lands agriculture. The movement of construction materials, agricultural equipment, and general supplies into the area is essential, as is also the timely transport of grain to processing centers. In 1954, only a few key railroads crossed the New Lands Area, and improved roads were almost completely lacking.

With the initiation of the program for extending agriculture, construction has started on approximately 2,132 kilometers of new railroad lines, about two-thirds of which are narrow-gauge. The two most important lines under construction are the Kustanay-Kokchetav-Kaymanachikha and the Kurgan-Peski-Sovkhoz Krasnoznamenskiy. In addition to the construction of new roads, many of the existing dirt roads have been improved to accommodate year-round traffic. Waterways are also to be improved and to be utilized to an increasing extent. The Ob' and Irtysh Rivers offer especially good opportunities for shipment of grain and other bulk items, and dams being constructed to provide hydroelectric power will also facilitate regulation of the river flow. Although these dams may also create some irrigation possibilities, current plans for this region make no provisions for irrigation. Even if plans were developed, irrigation could be undertaken only on a very small scale because of the limited water resources in relation to the vast extent of the area.

The New Lands Program is confronted by a multiplicity of recognized problems. Many of them have evaded satisfactory solution in the past, or the solutions adopted for the sake of expediency subsequently created new difficulties. After 2 years, the Soviets themselves are beginning to have some misgivings. In a recent speech to the Communist youth, who have distinguished themselves in the reclamation of the virgin lands, Khrushchev stated that in the first period, when new state farms were set up, some poor decisions were

made. Land was badly chosen, not only with regard to the amount of precipitation but also in terms of soil salinity. In such areas perhaps it would be expedient to change from grain farming to animal husbandry, for which the facilities of existing state farms would be suitable. The state would receive from these farms not wheat but fine wool. Bread grains, he concluded, could be cultivated in other places while the natural pastures and the crops produced would provide a good base for sheepbreeding. Thus Khrushchev is apparently beginning to realize that agriculture can be successful only if it is adapted to the entire range of physical conditions found in the marginal areas that form the New Lands Region. (CONFIDENTIAL)

CHINESE COMMUNIST ROAD DEVELOPMENT IN TIBET*

In late December 1954 the Chinese Communist press announced that two roads from China to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, were "open to traffic" -- a 1,400-mile road from Sikang and a 1,300-mile road from Tsinghai. Road projects were subsequently initiated within Tibet, and in October 1955 it was announced that a road had been opened linking Lhasa with Zhikatse and Gyangtse, the second and third largest cities. The new roads are referred to by the Chinese Communists as "busy thoroughfares," but their own news releases clearly indicate that these roads have been crudely and, in some cases, hurriedly built. Many sections are single-lane and have only rough preliminary grading; little surfacing has been done; numerous streams are still unbridged or are bridged only by temporary structures; and maintenance problems on many stretches may equal the difficulties of initial construction. Even though the Sikang and Tsinghai roads have been open for a year, little traffic has passed over them and apparently there have been frequent shutdowns.

Sikang-Tibet Highway** -- Initial work on the Sikang-Tibet road was begun in 1950 in conjunction with the advance of Chinese Communist

*This article has been coordinated with the Transportation Branch, Services Division, ORR.

**Since Sikang Province was incorporated within Szechwan Province in October 1955, it is possible that this highway will be renamed the Szechwan-Tibet Highway. The most recent reports available, however, do not indicate a change of name.

troops toward Tibet. The route generally follows the caravan trail that led from Ya-an, in eastern Sikang, to Ch'ang-tu (also called Chamdo), an important town on the eastern frontier of Tibet (see Map No. 25119). Some of the easternmost sections of the trail were motorable before work was begun on the road, and the entire section was declared open to traffic by late 1952.

It had been generally assumed that the section of the road west from Ch'ang-tu would follow the major Sikang-Lhasa route, the Gya-Lam, which winds across the mountains of west-central Sikang. Later reports and maps reveal, however, that the route chosen leads south-southwest from Ch'ang-tu to a point not far from the Indian border. From there it turns sharply west and follows, for the most part, comparatively low river valleys (8,000 to 10,000 feet), eventually joining the Gya-Lam at T'ai-chao (Figure 1). Construction would not appear to be much easier in this section, but the fact that about 70 percent of the route passes through populated agricultural districts simplified the procurement of laborers and food supplies. In contrast, the Gya-Lam passes through barren plateau and mountain country, which is very sparsely populated by nomadic Tibetan tribes.

The whole area through which the Sikang-Tibet road passes is formidable, with mountains to 19,000 feet elevation and numerous rivers, which flow through narrow gorges, in some places several thousand feet deep (Figure 2). The alignment of mountains and rivers is northwest-southeast, a serious obstacle to building an east-west

road. Passes over many of the mountain ranges are at 15,000 feet or higher, and the snow, cold, wind, and permanently frozen soil at these elevations frequently slowed or halted activities for considerable

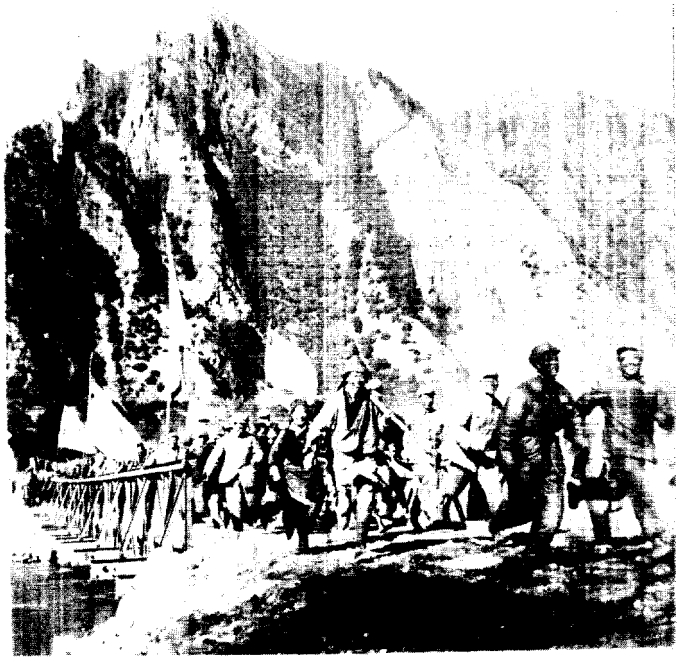
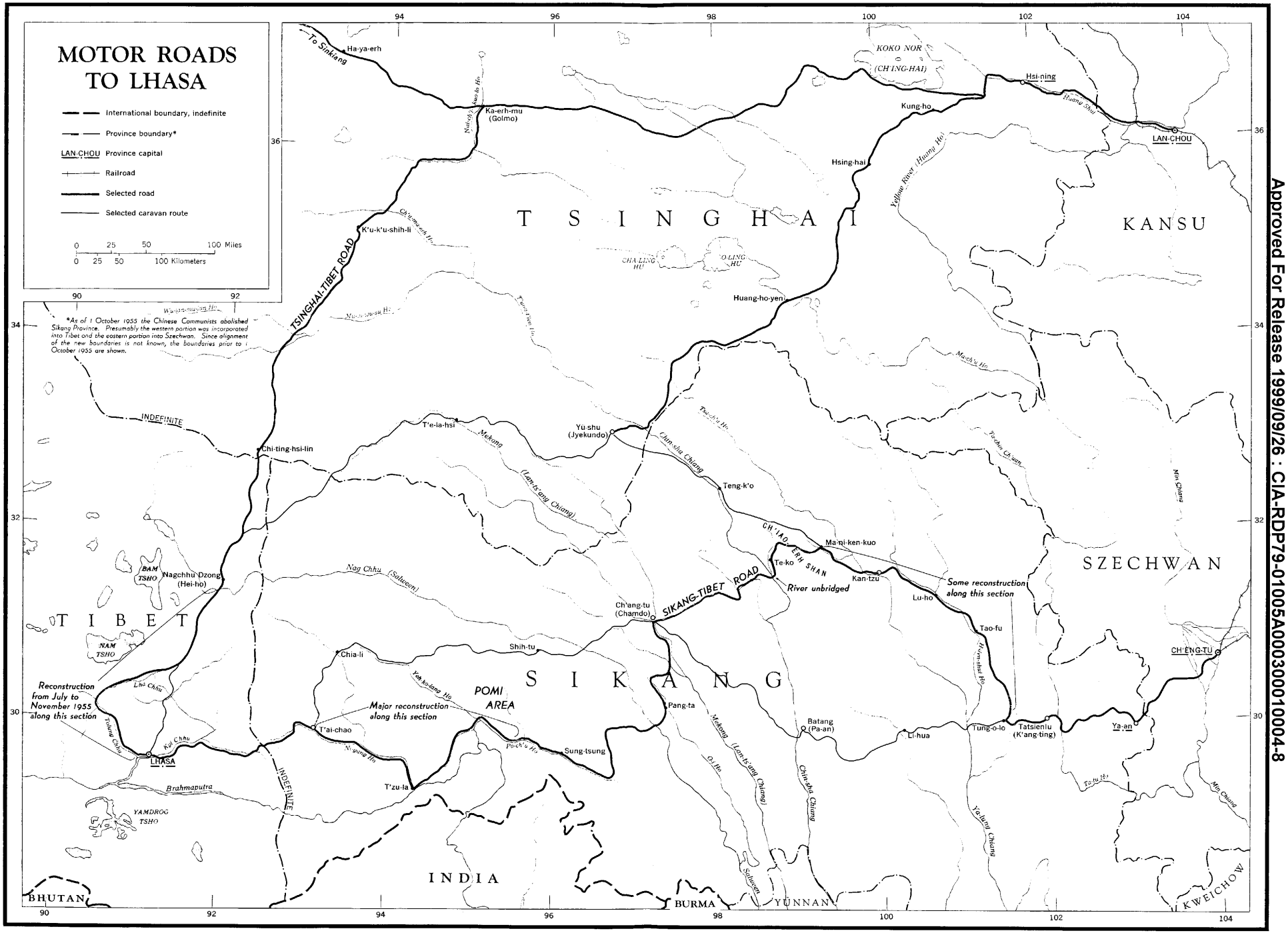


Figure 1. This scene purports to be the meeting of western and eastern sector workers on the Sikang-Tibet Highway. The exact location is unknown, but the stream is probably a tributary of the Tsangpo and not far from the main river. Its elevation is probably 9,000 to 10,000 feet. The view looks west.

periods. Other environmental handicaps included landslides, quicksands, earthquakes, and heavy summer rains.*

*Rainfall is very unpredictable in this region. Records for Lhasa (covering only 4 years) reveal that the May-September precipitation has totaled as much as 196 inches and as little as 8 inches.



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